

ME (Multicultural Education) Should Be Number One Goal in Every Classroom

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Our country and hence our classrooms are not monocultural, but are an amalgamation of many cultures (Hanley, 1999). The only thing to come from a dominant culture, one where other cultures are less than only creates aggression, antagonism and resistance (Hanley, 1999). One place where ME (multicultural education) can begin is in the classrooms across the USA. We need to remember that we can learn so much from each other.

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Approaches to ME (Multicultural Education)

Sleeter (1996) as cited in Hanley (1999) delineated five approaches to ME: (1) “Advocates of the teaching the culturally different” approach attempt to raise the academic achievement of students of color through culturally relevant instruction; (2) In the “human relations” approach, students are taught about commonalities of all people through understanding their social and cultural differences but not their differences in institutional and economic power; (3) The “single group studies” approach is about the histories and contemporary issues of oppression of people of color, women, low socioeconomic groups and gays and lesbians; (4) The “ME” approach promotes the transformation of the educational process to reflect the ideals of democracy in a pluralistic society. Students are taught contents using instructional methods that value cultural knowledge and differences; and (5) Educators who use the “social reconstructions” approach to ME go a step further to teach students about oppression and discrimination, students learn about their roles as social change agents so that they may participate in the generation of more equitable society.

The demographics of the USA are changing. According to Hanley (1999), by the year of 2020, 46% of the students in public schools will be children of color and 20.1% of all children will live in poverty (Banks, 1997a). Culture is what we learn and create to make sense of the world (Hanley, 1999). Multicultural educators need to address pedagogical impediments to the learning of marginalized students.

Some educators believe that if we include the celebration of a holiday of another culture, we have in fact incorporated ME into our classrooms. ME is more than holidays and food; it requires critical thinking with attention paid to complexity. It requires research and learning about multiple perspectives involved in any historical or contemporary experience in order to understand the rich meaning therein (Hanley, 1999).

Definitions of ME

Banks (1997a) discussed the dimensions of ME: content integration, knowledge construction, equity

pedagogy, prejudice reduction and an empowering school culture. The goal in Banks' dimensions is to create schools that encourage the full development of all students.

ME is about social change through education (Hanley, 1999). That is what keeps teachers fresh in their search for new ways to present information and new ideas to incorporate into their lesson plans. According to Greene (1995), people trying to be more fully human must not only engage in critical thinking, but must also be able to imagine something coming of their hopes; their silence must be overcome by their search. According to Gay (1994), the field of ME includes educational scholars as well as practitioners from many different professional, philosophical and pedagogical backgrounds.

According to Gay (1994), all ideas of ME have four characteristics: (1) They are based on a common set of assumptions; (2) They are born out of common concerns; (3) They contain common directions for actions; and (4) They share a desire to make cultural pluralism and ethnic diversity part of the educational process.

There are a few of the definitions of ME, according to scholars, such as Banks, Parekh and Bennett. According to Banks (1993), ME is an ongoing process requiring long-term investments of time and effort as well as carefully planned and monitored actions. Parekh (1986) said that ME is an education free of inherited biases, with freedom to explore other perspectives and cultures, inspired by the goal of making children sensitive to the plurality of the ways of life, different modes of analyzing experiences and ideas and ways of looking at history found throughout the world. Bennett (1990) stated that ME is an approach to teaching and learning based upon democratic values that foster cultural pluralism; in its most comprehensive form, it is a commitment to achieving education equality, developing curricula that builds understanding about ethnic groups and combating oppressive practices.

Therefore, it can be concluded that ME is a philosophy or methodology for educational reform. It is a set of specific content areas within instructional programs. In the classrooms across America, we should be celebrating the cultural diversity and learning more deeply about each other's cultures.

How Do We Incorporate ME in Our Classrooms?

According to Gay (1994), ME should be a regular part of education in the USA for three major reasons: (1) the social realities of USA society; (2) the influence of culture and ethnicity on human growth and development; and (3) the conditions of effective teaching and learning. Even though the USA has very diverse cultures, most individuals tend to live in close proximity to identical cultures: Little Italys, Chinatowns, etc.. Not only are we separated by cultures, we are also separated by racial and economic lines. Even in schools that are desegregated, the students tend to resegregate themselves in friendship choices. There is an absence of interactions with people who are different. That is where ME comes into the spotlight. ME can teach students about the culturally different groups and provide opportunities for these students to learn, live and work together.

Unfortunately, there are still people in the USA who still believe that there is only one way to live and that is the "American way". There is still discrimination and racism in the patterns of unemployment, imprisonment, poor health care and educational failures (Gay, 1994). The USA is not a "melting pot", but is a pluralistic society and that plays an important role in our society. No significant event in the historical and contemporary development of the country has occurred without some kind of ethnic influence and contribution (Gay, 1994). As a different ethnic, racial, social and cultural group growing in size and political significance, they will demand that social policies and programs be responsive to their particular needs and interests (Gay, 1994).

The USA is growing more involved in global affairs and possible shifting of international balance of

power. Japan, Germany and Korea are becoming very dominant players in the world's marketplace. Another consideration is the governmental instability in South and Central America. There are famines and droughts in Africa and Asia. All of these require USA support and involvement in providing health care and food supplies, plus the fact that the USA has many foreign investments in our economy. According to Bennett (1990), ME can create a foundation for effective and successful diplomacy in the global context.

Responsible education decision-making in a pluralistic society cannot result if educational leaders continue to function without being conscious of how culture shapes their own and their students' attitudes, values and behaviors (Gay, 1994). If students do not feel comfortable in the schools and classrooms, they will not be able to concentrate and take on the academically challenging tasks of everyday school. In order for students to learn, they must see a connection in what is being taught and the experiences that they have brought to the classroom. Learning is more effective when new ideas are related to prior knowledge and initially are taught in ways familiar to students (Neisser, 1986). According to most schools' goals, teachers should start teaching where students are and expand the social, cultural and intellectual horizons of students. We must acknowledge that students learn in different ways, most of which are governed by their cultural socialization (Gay, 1994).

Components of ME

According to Gay (1994), the goals and objectives of ME fall into seven general clusters: ethnic and cultural literacy, personal development, attitude and values clarification, multicultural social competence, basic skills proficiency, educational equity and excellence and empowerment for societal reform. Students need to be taught about the history and contributions of all ethnic groups. Distorted images of various ethnic groups must be changed. Students need to learn about the historical backgrounds, languages, cultural characteristics, contributions, critical events, significant individuals, and social, political and economic conditions of various majority and minority ethnic groups (Gay, 1994). Knowledge about ethnic pluralism is a necessary foundation for respecting, appreciating, valuing and celebrating diversity, both nationally and internationally (Gay, 1994).

When ME is truly integrated into the curriculum, students can take pride in their individual ethnic identities. As a result of a more positive self-concept, students will have higher academic achievement, ethnic and cultural individual identity.

ME encourages students to develop positive core values based on human dignity, justice, equality and freedom. Analyzing and clarifying ethnic attitudes and values are key steps in the process of unleashing the creative potential of individuals for self-renewal and society for continuous growth and development (Gay, 1994).

As the world draws ever closer as neighbors, students must learn how to interact with and understand people of different ethnic cultures. Teachers need to teach skills to help students develop interpersonal relations, perspective taking, contextual analysis, understanding alternative points of view and frames of reference and analyzing how cultural conditions affect values, attitudes, beliefs, preferences, expectations and behaviors (Gay, 1994).

Advantages of ME

ME can improve the mastery of many subjects, as well as critical thinking skills, problem-solving skills and conflict resolution skills. Also important in the classroom is how the students are taught. Teachers need to

teach students as they are accustomed to learning. When teachers respond this way, it creates personal affirmation and comfort in the classroom. This comfort in the classroom is vital if learning is to take place.

The better educated and experienced teachers are in dealing with and using ME in the classroom, the better their students will learn. One of the best ways for teachers to be able to teach students who are from a different culture is by researching the particular culture of the students who are in her class. All students need more options about how they will learn, options that are compatible with their cultural styles. Teachers should also teach accurate information about all segments of the USA society. The multicultural goal of achieving educational equity and excellence encompasses cognitive, affective and behavioral skills, as well as for everyday living the principles.

Conclusions

Ultimately, the goal of ME in the schools is to begin the process of change in the school and hopefully change in the society will follow. There are many models that have been developed to integrate ME into the curriculum. According to Banks (1999), there are four approaches to ME: (1) teaching about contributions of culturally different groups and individuals; (2) an additive approach in which multicultural lessons and units of study are supplements or appendages to existing curricula; (3) a transformation approach in which the basic nature of curriculum and instruction are changed to reflect the perspective and experiences of diverse cultural, ethnic, racial and social groups; and (4) a decision-making and social action approach that teaches students how to clarify their ethnic and cultural values and engage in socio political action for greater equality, freedom and justice for everyone. Grant and Sleeter (1993) generated four common approaches: (1) teaching culturally different students to fit into mainstream society; (2) a human relations approach that emphasizes diverse people living together harmoniously; (3) the single group studies approach which concentrates on developing awareness, respect and acceptance of one group at a time; and (4) focusing on prejudice reduction, providing equal opportunities and social justice for all groups, and the effects of inequitable power distribution on ethnic or cultural groups (Gay, 1994).

The classroom with diversity teaching the culturally different students should be more process-oriented than content-oriented. Teachers should establish more effective instructional relationships with students from different ethnic, cultural and racial backgrounds. Teachers should learn about the cultures of these students; this understanding will enhance the learning opportunities for ethnically different students.

Infusion is yet another approach to ME combining content and process, in other words, using materials that have the cultural diversity in them. As students study events or situations dealing with different ethnic groups, they can develop critical thinking skills as well as problem-solving skills to deal with their former knowledge of this culture.

Not much research has been done in the area of ME probably, because it is a highly affective idea which really does not lend itself to traditional empirical research methods. Most of the verifications of the benefits of ME are autobiographical stories that leaders in the field share among themselves. Therefore, research is fairly tentative and inconclusive. However, according to Banks (1999) and Gay (1991), there are some trends emerging about ME. The racial, ethnic and gender attitudes of students can be positively affected by curriculum and instructional interventions. Cooperative learning leads to more positive racial attitudes for all students. Teaching interventions that reinforce positive attributes of other ethnicities can reduce prejudices. Multicultural materials, vicarious experiences, role-playing and simulations can help students develop more positive racial

attitudes and perceptions.

There are some common features of ME: (1) requiring total school reform; (2) for all students in all grades and subjects; (3) involving acquiring knowledge, clarifying attitudes and values and developing social actions and skills about ethnic and cultural pluralism; and (4) including recognizing, accepting and celebrating diversity as a fundamental fact and salient feature in human life (Gay, 1994).

The bottom line is that we, as teachers in USA schools, acquire and develop the “courage and will to rise to the challenge and embrace the invitation to transform USA education so that it really does serve the needs of all children” (Gay, 1994). ME is a field of study designed to increase educational equity for all students that incorporates, for this purpose, content, concepts, principles, theories and paradigms from history, the social and behavioral sciences, and particularly from ethnic studies and women studies (Banks, 1995, p. xii).

According to Barker (2000, p. 2), American students’ knowledge of the world remains limited and that baseline data, assessment and dissemination of new approaches, and sustained commitment to implementation required for institutionalizing in schools do not yet exist. More than one in three students in the public schools is of an ethnic or racial minority (NCES (National Center for Educational Statistics), 2000). More than one in seven children speaks a language other than English at home and over one-third of them are of limited English proficiency (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 1999).

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